

HENGISTBURY HEAD  
DORSET

Interim report on the trial excavations  
1981

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Hengistbury Head, Dorset: Iron Age Project

Interim note on the third season of excavations, 1981

1. Introduction

1.1 The third season of excavations at the Iron Age site on Hengistbury Head took place from 5 to 30 July, 1981 after a preparatory week during which the topsail was removed mechanically. The excavation team averaged 30 people per day drawn largely from the Universities of Durham, Oxford and Southampton. As in previous years the work was organized by the Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford, with the active cooperation of Bournemouth Corporation.

1.2 Efforts were concentrated upon Site 1 which lies on the north side of the Head, on the south shore of Christchurch Harbour, close to Bushe-Fox's sites 36 and 44 and to the area trial trenches by David Peacock in 1970-1. In 1979-80 approximately 500 square metres of the Iron Age settlement was excavated. The 1981 session added a further 760 square metres immediately to the west of last year's site. The excavation was preceded by a geophysical survey.

A limited programme of core-boring work was undertaken in one of the nearby areas of marshland (Site 3) by the National Maritime Museum. This work is in preparation for the first stage of an excavation which it is hoped to carry out next year.

2. The Excavation: Site 1

2.1 The area excavated this year was almost twice as extensive as that examined in 1980; it divides naturally into two zones. Over the southern part of the site the surface of the natural gravel lies at about 0.4 m below the present surface and is sealed only

by a disturbed ploughsoil. Towards the north, however, the land falls away and up to 1 m of stratified soil survives beneath the ploughsoil. It can now be shown that the natural profile was created as a beach line in the prehistoric period, the 'bed rock' grading from shingly gravel to sand as the 'between tide zone' is crossed. Three original land-forms can be recognized: the tidal zone of sand and sandy gravel; the upper beach of loose shingle and the soil covered land surface. Each zone was differently utilized in the Iron Age.

The high tide limit of the old beach line is about 0.67 m above the present beach. It had evidently been raised to some unknown degree by the beginning of the first century BC but there is some evidence to suggest a lowering, leading to inundation, in the second half of the first century BC.

2.2 The archaeological evidence demonstrates occupation from the eighth century BC to the fourth century AD during which time postholes, pits, gullies, ditches and quarries were dug, a road was constructed and maintained, ovens were built and ploughing created a deposit of lynchet material which sealed earlier occupation levels over the northern part of the area. Of particular value was the fact that this year's excavation allowed the northern and western limits of the early and late Iron Age settlement area to be defined with precision, adding considerably to our understanding of the features excavated in 1979-80. In addition the closely stratified sequence has enabled the cultural and chronological development of the settlement to be more closely refined.

#### 2.3 The earliest occupation: eighth to fifth century BC

The early settlement, represented culturally by coarse finger-impressed jars and haematite coated bowls, extended into the eastern part of the excavation. The gully of circular plan which presumably surrounded a house was the westernmost of the major structural elements of the settlement but beyond it were short lengths of fence or palisade trenches which may have delimited ancillary enclosures. The settlement can now be shown to have extended down to the edge of the old shore line. The total absence of early occupation in the raised between-tide zone may indicate that the sea level was higher during the period of the early settlement than it was in the later Iron Age.

#### 2.4 The fourth to second century BC

The apparent hiatus in the settlement sequence spanning the middle part of the Iron Age, which was noted last year, seems to be further confirmed by this year's work. It could, however, be that occupation was continuous but that minor shifts in location and the limited nature of the present excavation have left the middle phase settlement still beyond the limits of the area explored.

The problem will only be resolved by more extensive work.

#### 2.5 The late Iron Age settlement: late second century BC-first century AD

Late in the second century or early in the first century BC the settlement area seems to have been organized according to an overall scheme of lay out. This entailed the creation of a road line, along the upper edge of the raised beach, with fenced enclosures on either side. The enclosure to the south appears to have been long lived with four successive fence lines. Fence slots found

in the 1980 area and then incompletely understood, can now be more fully interpreted in the light of the new evidence. It would appear that the earliest enclosure (of two phases), approximately 14 m wide east to west, was replaced by a larger enclosure, also of two phases, slightly realigned. During this period an extensive gravel quarry some 10 m across was dug along the road side. The quarry, excavated in 1980 and 1981 produced a fine sequence of stratified pottery including local types, imports from North western France and Dressel 1a ware amphorae of Italian origin. The upper levels yielded a classic Durotrigan assemblage associated with Spanish amphorae of Pascual I type.

The roadway which flanked the northern side of the enclosure was originally nothing more than an open strip along the old raised beach, but throughout the first century BC and first century AD discontinuous patches of gravel metalling and ironstone rubble were laid to consolidate the surface. Later metalling layers sealed the filling of the quarry hollow and the road continued to be repaired into the early Roman period.

To the west of the main series of enclosures it appears that in the late Iron Age the area was totally devoid of occupation but the road continued. The northern edge of the road was delimited by gullies and fence slots beyond which, on the old sandy beach, a series of irregular holes and scoops had been dug into the sand. These contained occupation debris including quantities of imported Dressel amphorae, briquetage salt containers and some iron working debris. Several large postholes suggest that substantial buildings may once have occupied the shore line but no convincing building plans could be made out largely because the area uncovered was of

restricted extent: it had also been disturbed by Bushe-Fox's excavations the limits of which could clearly be traced. The primary occupation of this zone, dating to the first half of the first century BC, was sealed by a water-lain deposit of fine gravel grading up to gritty sand, measuring some 10 cm thick, implying a minor inundation. Above this was a thick soil deposit, containing much blown-sand, and yielding Durotrigan and early Roman pottery.

#### 2.6 Roman occupation

The late Iron Age road continued in use into the Roman period. A series of gullies were dug parallel to it some 15 m to the south perhaps to delimit fields. In support of this it may be noted that a number of plough ruts running parallel to the gullies have been found on various parts of the site. Later in the Roman period, in the late third or early fourth century, a new system of more substantial ditches was dug at right angles to the natural slope but ending on the edge of the road line. They appear to have delimited plots of varying widths within which traces of occupation were found including postholes and ovens together with gravel spreads and areas of ironstone paving. Building plans are, however, elusive.

### 3. The Marsh: Site 3

3.1 Core boring across the marshy area known as Site 3 defined a gravel bottom at about 2 m below the present surface. Samples have been taken and the bore holes levelled in. The rectangular shape of the marsh and its comparatively steep sides strongly hint that it may be a man-made feature. Trial excavation of the edge may

throw some light on the problem.

3.2 It was hoped to carry out a survey of the harbour between Sites 1 and 3 in an attempt to define anomalies in the sub-bottom profile. Suitable equipment could not be obtained in time but the National Maritime Museum are examining ways of undertaking the survey in the coming year.

4. General implications

4.1 It is now abundantly clear that the site has a very considerable archaeological potential largely because of the preservation of the stratified deposits and the intimate relationship of successive settlements to the changing configuration of the shore line. The discovery this year of boundaries and roads will enable cohesive settlement patterns to be elucidated.

4.2 The earliest occupation of the eighth-fifth centuries can now be seen to be a discrete shore-line settlement, apparently unenclosed, but with a well-defined western boundary. The trial trenches cut by Bushe-Fox in 1911-12 defined at least six other locations producing comparable early finds. The social and economic nature of this early occupation still remains to be defined. While we may be dealing with isolated (or successive) peasant homesteads the possibility remains that the individual sites may have comprised a larger and more complex community with functionally or socially differentiated settlement nuclei. To examine at least one extensively is a high priority.

4.3 The problem of the fourth-second century 'hiatus' remains. If indeed the headland was largely unoccupied during this period it would have

interesting economic implications. However, the precise physical coincidence of the early and late Iron Age settlements is surprising. More extensive excavation or a detailed reassessment of the ceramic assemblage of the region might show the gap to be more apparent than real.

- 4.4 The organized nature of the late Iron Age settlements, which has been demonstrated this year, is of considerable interest. The roadways and fenced enclosures are reminiscent of the lay out of late Iron Age oppida in central Europe. The maintenance of the boundary lines over a lengthy period of time and the continued use of the road into the early Roman period might imply a degree of economic and social stability.
- 4.5 The well-stratified deposits of pottery still have to be analyzed in detail. One observation of potential interest is that locally-made 'saucepans' and 'Glastonbury wares' are found stratified with imported Dressel 1a amphorae but unmixed with North-western French imports, which appear to occur slightly later in the sequence. If this proves to be a general truth then it will be an interesting insight into the developing trade network, suggesting that the long-distance trade in wine preceded, if only slightly, short-haul cross-Channel traffic. Clearly a larger sample of material is needed before generalizations of this kind can be demonstrated.
- 4.6 There is little more to add, as a result of this year's excavation, on the subject of industrial activity but the concentration of sherds of amphorae and salt containers along the shore edge may be an indication of activity areas. The exact nature of the sea

front buildings would be interesting to discover and makes more urgent the need to understand sea level changes at this time.

4.7 The continuity of the late Iron Age settlement pattern into early Roman times raises questions of the status of the site from the time when the extensive overseas links were established in c. 100 BC to the immediate post-conquest period. The sample size must be improved before these matters can be sensibly approached.

#### 5. Future Programme

Sufficient will have been said to show that Hengistbury has a very high potential in any research design concerned to study the socio-economic development of Southern Britain in the Iron Age. To further the research programme it is hoped to develop the following projects:

- a) Excavation. In 1982 a further area of the shore line settlement will be excavated immediately to the east of the 1979 sample in an attempt to define an eastern limit for the early and late Iron Age occupation areas. Improved knowledge of the settlement morphology may allow a programme of trial exploration to be developed to place the present settlement area in its broader context.
- b) Environmental. Site 3 will be further examined by boring and excavation in an attempt to define whether it is a natural or artificial inlet and to explore its potential for environmental studies.
- c) Survey. It is hoped to initiate a detailed contour survey of the low lying areas of the headland and to examine the

submarine configuration of the southern part of Christ-church Harbour.

d) Ceramic studies. Work on the imported Iron Age ceramics will continue. Dr. David Peacock is undertaking the petrological analysis and French colleagues in Brittany and Normandy are cooperating in a number of ways.

#### 6. Acknowledgements

The excavation at Hengistbury forms part of a programme of research undertaken by the Institute of Archaeology at the University of Oxford. The Institute has organized the excavation and has provided the necessary administrative and support facilities.

Financial support for the excavation has been made available by the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries, the University of Durham Excavation Fund and Harveys Ltd. while much practical help has been given by the Parks Department of Bournemouth Corporation through the kind offices of Mr. E. Hunt whose unfailing enthusiasm for the work has been a great encouragement to us all. Michael Ridley of the Russell-Cotes Museum has been present throughout the excavation offering every kind of assistance. To both our very grateful thanks are due.

The actual work of excavation was undertaken by some thirty volunteers, mainly students from the Universities of Durham, Oxford and Southampton. Colin Haselgrave of the University of Durham assisted with the direction, Cynthia Poole, Lisa Brown and Lyn Sellwood of the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford supervised individual sites while John Taylor, also of the Institute, undertook the section drawing, and Elaine Morris of the University of

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Southampton took charge of finds. Finally thanks are due to Sean McGrail of the National Maritime Museum and his staff for initiating aspects of the survey work.

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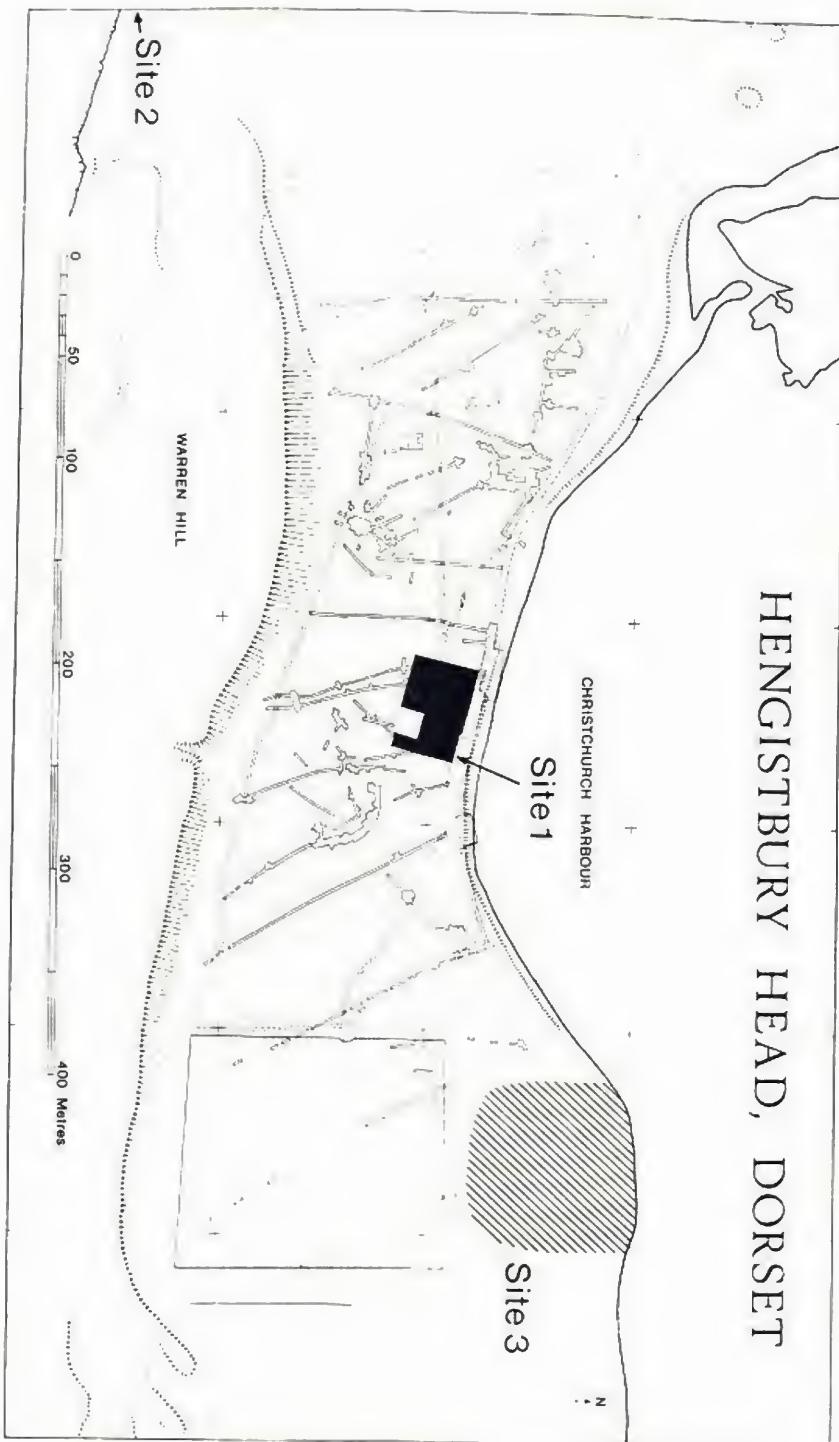


Fig. 1. Detail of Hengistbury showing the position  
of the main sites against the background  
of Bushe-Fox's excavation of 1911

HENGISTBURY HEAD 1979-81 All features



Fig. 2

# HENGISTBURY HEAD 1979-81 Early Iron Age structures

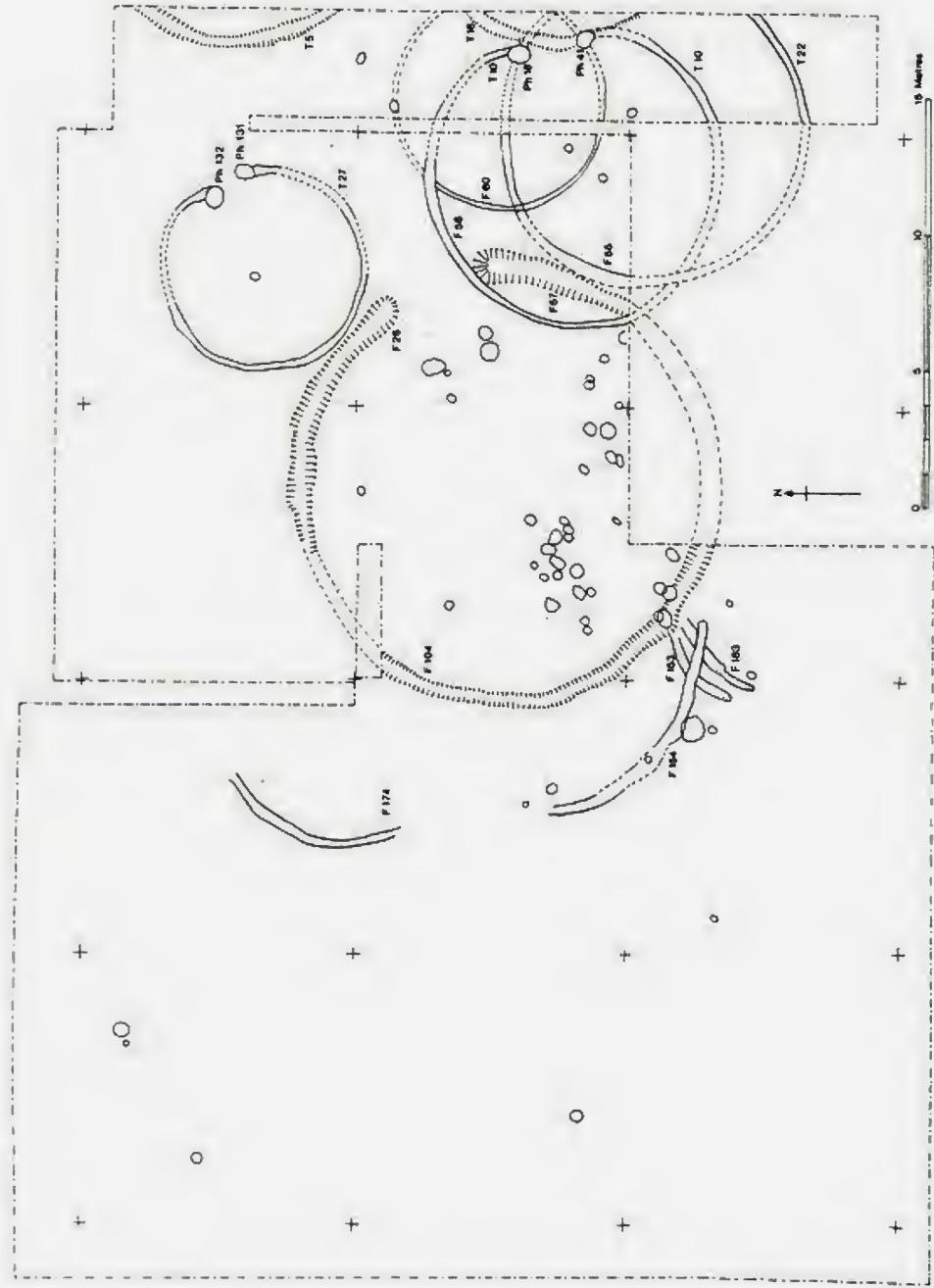


Fig. 3

HENGISTBURY HEAD 1979-81  
Late pre-Roman Iron Age (post holes omitted)

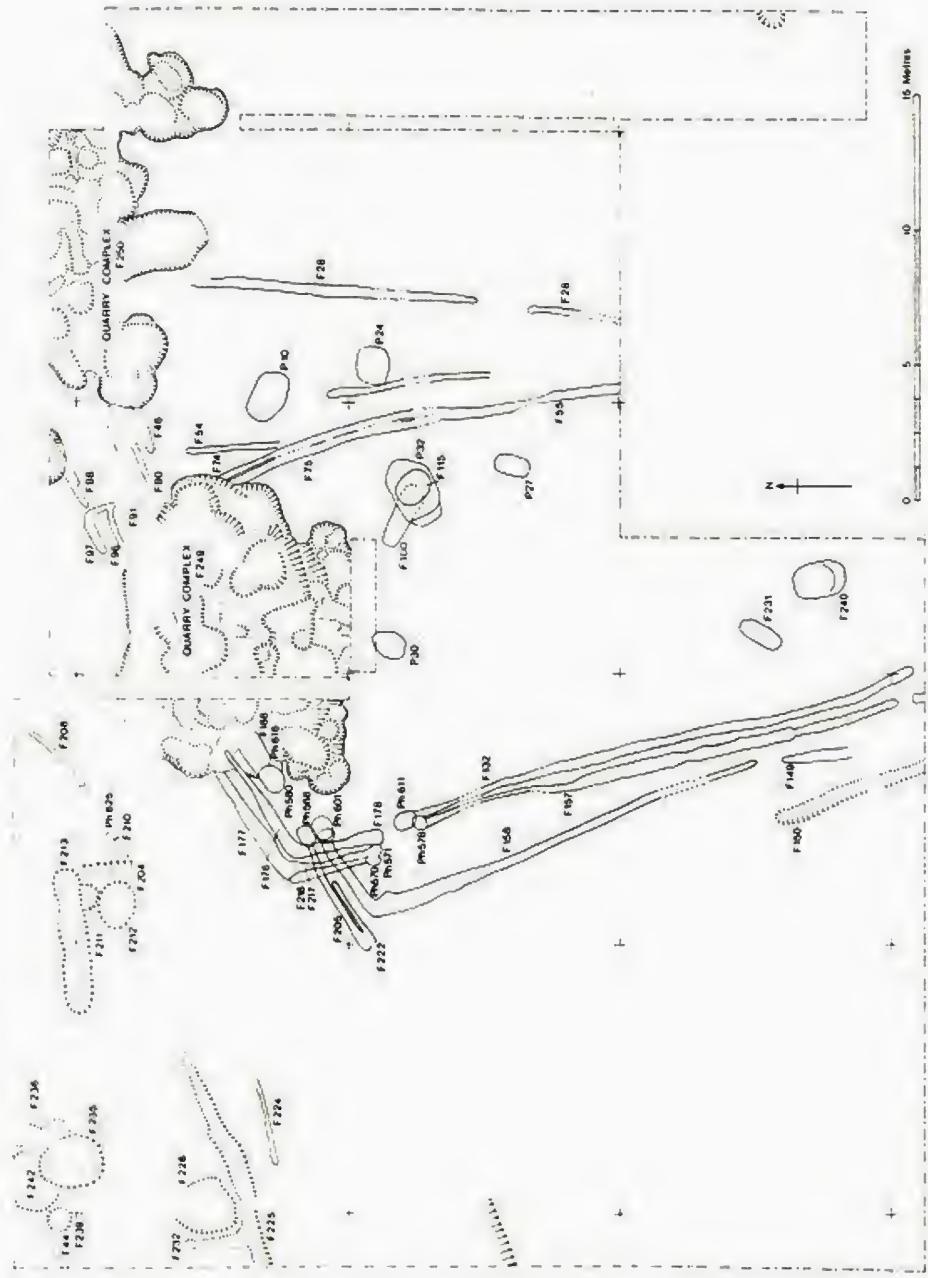


Fig. 4

HENGISTBURY HEAD 1979-81 Roman

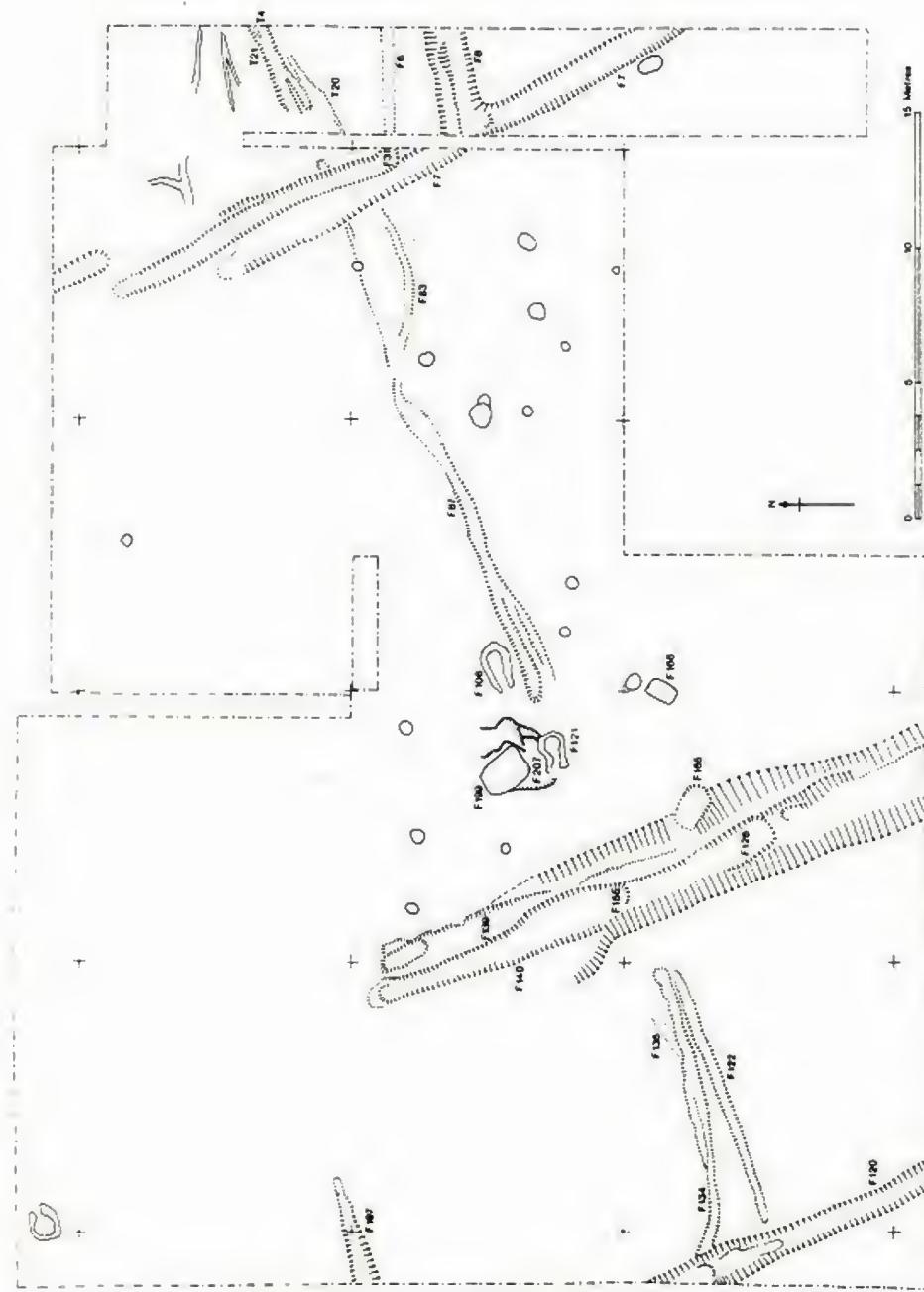


Fig. 5